

Documenting the Experiences of Civil Society Organizations in Lebanon with Resistance and Backlash on Gender Equality (January 2022 – April 2023)

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This research is a documentation exercise conducted and drafted on behalf of the Feminist Platform in Lebanon for the period from January 2022 to April 2023 by Rima el Mokdad and Marianne Touma (Gender Advisors) at UN Women, and edited by Jen Ross. The research was funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

Executive Summary

Lebanon has been experiencing an escalating emergency resulting from concurrent crises, ranging from the financial and economic crisis to the COVID-19 outbreak, to the Beirut port blast, as well as unprecedented institutional failure and political deadlock. Women and persons of diverse gender and sexual identities have been historically marginalized and disproportionately affected by crises, mainly on account of existing oppressive patriarchal structures. This is giving way to dangerous forms of discrimination, violence and inequality and the backlash witnessed has been intersectional in nature, targeting groups affected by multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion and discrimination.

To assess this backlash, two Gender Advisors embedded at UN Women, funded by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), conducted a documentation exercise on behalf of the Feminist Platform¹ in Lebanon for the period extending from January 2022 until April 2023. The primary objective of this exercise was to uncover the various forms of resistance encountered by some civil society organizations (CSOs) operating in diverse contexts but sharing common goals. It sought to assess the backlash in terms of prevalence, types, consequences and management, as well as mitigation and response measures to identify the support needed from different stakeholders.

To this end, qualitative key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 21 CSO representatives in Lebanon. Although this exercise did not cover all CSOs facing resistance and backlash, it provides an overview of what several CSOs face to give a broader understanding of the situation.

Results from the KIIs reveal that almost all CSOs working towards gender equality and ending gender-based violence (GBV) have faced various forms of resistance and backlash since 2022. There was consensus among CSOs that resistance and backlash is, in itself, a sign of progress for the feminist and gender equality agendas in the country, as long as its intensity is “manageable”. However, active forms of backlash threaten to cause rollbacks on rights and achievements and shrink the space for action and activism for CSOs and other relevant stakeholders.

Most CSOs (13) reported experiencing attacks both against or during their activities as well as against the organization itself (its mission and mandate), with six organizations saying that the backlash was only targeted at specific activities. The majority of cited resistance and backlash incidents were from: the community (54 incidents), State actors (27 incidents) and finally, international resistance (five incidents).

Although CSOs have faced diverse and distinct forms and manifestations of backlash, CSOs are being confronted with the same recurrent accusations, namely:

1. Promoting Western beliefs and agendas and opposing cultural and religious values: CSOs’ activities are alleged to subvert traditions and cultural and religious beliefs, citing misinformation such as the promotion of religious conversion from Islam to Christianity and encouraging premarital sex. This accusation is also used against campaigns addressing marital rape.
2. Promoting homosexuality: This sweeping charge is often levelled against CSOs with the intent to tarnish their reputation and undermine their standing, even in cases where their activities are not related to or centered around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other (LGBTQI+) rights.
3. Destroying the family: Accusations include encouraging divorce and break-ups as well as accusations that wives and children are being kidnapped (in the context of safe shelters).
4. Neglecting national priorities: This is seen as the consequence of focusing on “non-urgent” issues, like gender equality and gender-based violence.

KII results also revealed a range of tactics employed by perpetrators:

1. Tactics used against women’s rights organizations:
 - De-Prioritization Of Women And Gender Equality: While The Country Grapples With Political And Economic Instability, Issues Of Women’s Rights And Gender Equality Tend To Become Easily Overshadowed And Framed As “Secondary Issues” By Community And State Actors.
 - Establishment Of False Dichotomies: Causes Are Pitted Against Each Other, Mainly By Setting Women’s Rights In Opposition To National Struggles Or Lgbtqi+ Rights. Promoting Homosexuality Has Become A Blind And Heavy Accusation Against All Csos, Irrespective Of Their Mandates Or Target Groups, Leading Several Csos To Call For A Need To Segregate Causes And Champion Only The Rights Of The Groups They Represent. This Classic ‘Divide And Conquer’ Strategy Insinuates That Defending One Cause Comes At The Expense Of Another, Thus Devaluing Both.
 - The Rampant Spread Of Misinformation And Fake News: This Includes Allegations

Of Csos Kidnapping Women Or Promoting Premarital Sex. This Is Complemented By Fearmongering As Alarmist Narratives Are Propagated, Suggesting That Women's Rights Initiatives Dissolve Traditional Family Structures, Stoking Fear And Resistance Among Their Communities.

2. Tactics used against LGBTQI+ organizations:
 - The tactic of scapegoating stands out prominently as specific individuals or groups, such as the LGBTQI+ community or refugees, are unjustly blamed for broader societal issues. This deflects from the actual issues and redirects public anger towards them. CSOs, in their attempt to shield these marginalized communities, often bear the brunt of this blame.
 - Scapegoating often overlaps with the strategy of creating a common enemy. Opposition groups ingeniously intertwine women's rights with contentious topics like religious conversion and misinformation about LGBTQI+ rights, melding these distinct issues into a singular, palpable enemy. This conflation ensures widespread societal pushback against CSOs, further impeding their efforts.
 - Beyond these tactics, economic and legal pressures and interference also play a role. Political and State actors have imposed legal restrictions, often unconstitutional, that hamper CSO operations and target vulnerable groups. Surveillance, unwarranted raids, and direct threats from security apparatuses and community-based groups further act to intimidate CSOs.

These alarming results are setbacks threatening to tarnish long-fought battles and achievements on the road to an equal society in Lebanon. When asked about trends of resistance and backlash during the period under study compared to previous years, most CSOs (12) indicated that backlash is rising. Five CSOs said that opposition to their mandates and activities is the same but has become more visible since 2022, while three were indecisive. Several interviewees expressed shock regarding the dramatic setback and resistance they have witnessed in the last year and a half, with many voicing concerns about a "soon-to-explode" situation that would make these organizations direct targets of violence and extremism.

Based on the findings of this exercise, the Feminist Platform recommends several actions to address the rising backlash against women's rights and LGBTQI+ organizations in Lebanon:

For donors and international organizations:

- Increase communication with local CSOs working with different groups and in different areas to reflect on resistance and backlash, emerging trends and shifts in power dynamics. Build direct contact and communication between donors and NGOs so donors and international organizations can better understand the context and backlash while CSOs can benefit from donors' lessons learned in the global context.
- Increase communication with CSOs on potential visibility risks before setting communication and visibility strategies, to abide by a "do no harm" approach.
- Increase solidarity and advocacy through more robust support for CSOs and increased pressure against State actors perpetrating backlash. Reconsider funding for State bodies that initiate or perpetrate backlash.
- Provide safe spaces and venues that are accessible and affordable for different organizations to implement their activities without fear for their staff and/or beneficiaries' safety.
- Increase funding to organizations working with women and marginalized groups and avoid the de-prioritization of any group.

- Adopt flexible funding modalities and implementation approaches so that organizations can direct funds where they are needed most and better cope with, and respond to, evolving circumstances (similar to the flexibility provided during COVID-19).
- Fund inclusive programming that caters to different groups' needs. In humanitarian and need-based programming, ensure that no groups are being discriminated against and/or unjustly denied services.
- Fund and commission researchers to document and report on resistance and backlash, including collecting and analyzing data, and monitoring changes and shifts in power dynamics.

For the Feminist Platform:

- Develop a clear strategy to counter the backlash and build a common counter-narrative that addresses the above tactics used by perpetrators.
- Strengthen and expand the Feminist Platform to assume a more prominent role in facilitating coordination and collaboration among CSOs. This includes building partnerships to complement work, avoid duplication, and act in solidarity in response to the backlash.
- Increase spaces for dialogue between CSOs to create awareness of the needs of different groups and find common ground. This could be done by ensuring that national and subnational working groups – such as the Gender Working Group, Protection Working Group, GBV Working Group, LGBTQI+ Task Force, etc. – are actively involved in fostering this space for increasing dialogue between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on resistance and backlash. This will allow different organizations to implement inclusive programs that reach all demographics.
- Provide legal support for small CSOs and CSOs working with vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQI+ individuals and Syrian refugee women – support that they could seek when facing backlash.
- Facilitate access to dedicated activists and journalists that could act as a resource that CSOs affected by backlash can reach out to, if they so choose, to share their stories and experiences.
- Regularly assess and reflect on resistance and backlash to identify appropriate mitigation and response mechanisms. Also, it is vital to differentiate between backlash and resistance versus contextual challenges. This could be done through regularly documenting resistance and backlash and bringing it to the forefront of discussions on the gender equality agenda.

For CSOs:

- Adopt a proactive stance on countering backlash, including actively shaping and promoting alternative discourse and engaging in strategic communication, awareness-raising and targeted messaging.
- Boost community-level work to increase local solidarity and foster support, including increased field-level outreach, to mobilize local communities.
- Whenever possible, adopt inclusive programming that does not leave any group behind.
- Increase safety and security considerations during project implementation to protect implementers and target groups. This entails budgeting for increased security measures and risk-mitigation strategies for resistance.
- In times of increased resistance and backlash, discuss options to reduce the external visibility of programs, public events and activities.
- Train CSO staff on gender equality to avoid internal resistance and backlash.
- Train CSO staff and project implementers on appropriate strategies to respond to, and mitigate, backlash.

Background

Resistance² can be broadly defined as the pushback against change in an attempt to preserve a gender-unequal status quo, while backlash represents a form of resistance that often involves power and marks increased violence (Mansbridge & Shames, 2008). In recent years, against the increasing contestation of the gender equality agenda, both anti-gender rhetoric and opposition to this agenda have been gaining ground globally with already established and newly emerging anti-gender ideology movements (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020).

Worldwide, civil society organizations (CSOs) working towards achieving gender justice and challenging existing unequal structures and systems commonly experience resistance and backlash. Organizations identify different forms of resistance in their day-to-day experiences, and this opposition can be manifested in different ways, targeting ideologies, programs, projects or activities. Resistance and backlash happen when political and social conservatism is invoked against organizations or specific projects fighting dominant social norms, pushing for gender equality or countering violence against women, girls and other groups of diverse gender and sexual identities (UN Women, 2021). Moreover, resistance is influenced by economic cycles, as they bring about political shifts (Roggeband & Krizsán, 2020).

Women's rights are inherently political because they affect every law, Constitution, and the very essence and structure of the existing system. It's no longer just about providing services. To protect women, you must change laws and have civil personal status laws. You cannot change women's political participation without changing the electoral law and putting women at the top of the electoral lists. Women are at the forefront of this change. – CSO representative

Global Backlash Against Women and Girls' Rights

In recent years, trends of increased resistance and backlash can be seen globally. In multiple countries, the rollback on gender equality resulting from a rise in anti-gender rhetoric has emerged. During 2022, we witnessed women and teenaged girls being banned from attending secondary schools and universities, working in many jobs, and facing restrictions on their movement outside their homes (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In some countries, constitutional guarantees to safe legal abortion were abolished and women and girls faced increasing restrictions to sexual and reproductive rights (Lempinen, 2022) while in others, international treaties tackling violence against women and girls were revoked.

Global Backlash Against the LGBTQI+ Communities

In the same context, the backlash against LGBTQI+ communities is global and has been gaining momentum. Gender-related backlash has been particularly grave against lesbian, queer, bisexual and trans women.

The Case of Lebanon

No different from global trends, resistance and backlash against gender equality have been gaining ground in Lebanon. For more than three years, Lebanon has been experiencing an escalating emergency resulting from concurrent crises, ranging from the financial and economic crisis to the COVID-19 outbreak, to the Beirut port blast, as well as unprecedented institutional failure and political deadlock. Women and persons of diverse gender and sexual identities have been historically marginalized and disproportionately affected by crises, mainly on account of existing oppressive patriarchal structures (El Rahi, 2023).

Today, and within this context, the existing patriarchal structure coupled with the absence of legislative reform, poverty, corruption and political deadlock is giving way to danger-

ous forms of discrimination, violence and inequality, particularly towards women and persons of diverse gender and sexual identities.

As a result, in the last two years, resistance and backlash against gender equality in Lebanon, perpetrated by State actors and the community (including non-State actors and the wider population), have become more rampant and evident. Since January 2022, a series of alarming incidents that violate fundamental human rights and gender equality have occurred, and the backlash witnessed has been clearly intersectional in nature, targeting groups affected by multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion and discrimination. Key manifestations of this backlash have included:

Of course, we will face a misogynist and patriarchal opposition because there is an authority that will be weakened; we will be revoking familial privileges from men; this resistance is normal and expected. – CSO representative

- De-prioritization and downplay of women's rights: unprecedented statements by government officials and prominent representatives de-prioritizing the importance of women's and girls' rights are being openly expressed without any consideration for their obligations under international human rights declarations and treaties to which the Lebanese State is committed. In March 2023, one minister questioned whether improving women's political participation and addressing early marriage should be the top priorities and de-prioritized them by suggesting that they will not "solve the crisis". Meanwhile, the head of a legal association made controversial remarks during a symposium on domestic violence, implying that women may harm themselves intentionally in order to falsely claim that they are being abused. More recently, following an article published criticizing the hosting of a director who faced allegations of sexual harassment against women and minors, the journalist and activist Hayat Merhad was summoned for investigation by the cybercrime bureau and was called to appear in court based on a filed complaint (Al Jammal, 2023). Meanwhile, a recent report on violence against women in politics during the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections concluded that violence against women activists and women in politics was widespread (Chebaro, 2022).
- Bans and attacks against LGBTQI+ communities: In June 2022, Lebanese authorities unlawfully banned peaceful gatherings of LGBTQI+ people. The ban, which had no legal basis, was issued by the Minister of Interior against community gatherings that "promote sexual perversion" (L'Orient Today, 2022). The decision came in response to calls from religious groups to "reject the spread of this phenomenon". Following his decision, a wave of anti-LGBTQI+ hate speech took place on social media and on the ground, including incitement to violence, death threats and calls to ban the scheduled events by force as well as advocating actual attacks against these communities, CSOs as well as centers that advocate for their rights (Hourany, 2023).
- Attacks from emerging conservative and paramilitary groups and long-established religious groups: The backlash at the State level quickly resulted in increased backlash at the community level, including but not limited to the rise of paramilitary groups' vigilantism, with the most prominent example being "Jnoud El Rab" (Soldiers of God), a newly established radical Christian group in Lebanon. The group comprises around a few hundred men and originated in the streets of Achrafieh, a neighborhood in Lebanon's capital, Beirut. They have openly declared war against refugees, the LGBTQI+ community, abortion, civil marriage, and anyone they claim is spreading "sin" within their areas of influence. Similar attacks have been reported from radical Muslim religious groups against several organizations working to prevent early marriage and gender-based violence.

CSOs working towards progressing the gender equality agenda in the country have been among the main targets of this backlash. CSOs working with marginalized groups have faced different types and forms of backlash, with varying intensities. This discourse, if unhindered, poses threats to gender equality and feminist agendas, impacting CSOs' ability to implement activities, function or even stand for their fundamental goals to push through progressive social change. Until today, a thorough desk review of existing literature suggests that these incidents and their repercussions have never been thoroughly or collectively documented, investigated or reported.

Purpose

Several CSOs affiliated with the Feminist Platform in Lebanon have expressed major concerns about the significant and increasing backlash that they and other organizations have faced since the beginning of 2022, as well as its detrimental impact on their activities and, consequently, the gender equality discourse in Lebanon. Given the urgency of addressing this backlash, the Platform conducted thorough discussions to determine the most effective course of action. One of the initial steps proposed by the Platform was to conduct comprehensive documentation to capture a snapshot of the various types of backlash. This approach aims to enhance the Platform's understanding of the situation, enabling members to develop appropriate strategies for countering challenges. Consequently, the Platform prioritized the documentation and analysis of ongoing events, laying the foundation for future advocacy efforts to engage different stakeholders and implement targeted measures to mitigate the backlash.

Documenting the resistance faced by CSOs working towards gender equality is not common practice in Lebanon. In general, aggressive and violent forms of backlash are heard of, but most backlash is passive, and thus seldom detected or often dismissed. Such backlash is often considered a given or an accepted or inevitable aspect of the prevailing work environment, further contributing to its dismissal.

In light of the increasing incidents of resistance and backlash experienced by CSOs in Lebanon over the past year and a half, the current exercise aims to provide a concrete picture of the resistance and backlash against gender equality during this period (January 2022–April 2023), specifically backlash faced by CSOs working on gender equality and ending violence against women. Two United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)-funded Gender Advisors embedded at UN Women conducted this exercise on behalf of the Feminist Platform in Lebanon.

The primary objective of this exercise is to uncover the various forms of resistance encountered by CSOs operating in diverse contexts but sharing common goals, and to assess it – in terms of prevalence, types, consequences, and mitigation and response measures – to identify the support needed from different stakeholders. It is important to note that although this exercise does not encompass all CSOs facing resistance and backlash, it aims to provide an overview of the main resistance and backlash that specific organizations working in different areas face to provide a broader understanding of the situation.

Methodology

To document the backlash, key informant interviews (KIIs) with representatives of 21 CSOs working on gender issues in Lebanon were conducted. The selection criteria covered:

- CSOs working with women and girl beneficiaries of different nationalities (Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian refugees and migrant workers)
- CSOs working with LGBTQI+ communities
- CSOs working with women and girls with disabilities

- CSOs working at the national level (larger-sized CSOs) as well as smaller-sized CSOs working in specific areas across the five different regions in the country (North, Mount Lebanon, Beirut, Bekaa, South)

CSOs included in the KIIs were selected based on a desk review of their profiles and consultations with Feminist Platform members, the Gender Working Group (GWG)³ and the UN LGBTQI+ Task Force⁴ coordinators.⁵ After the primary selection of a sample of CSOs, an invitation was sent to all Platform members to identify additional members who could be interested in being included in the sample. Table A1 in the Annex summarizes the main questions covered in the KIIs. It is important to note that although this exercise does not encompass all CSOs facing resistance and backlash, it aims to provide an overview of the main resistance and backlash that specific organizations working in different areas have faced between January 2022 and April 2023, so as to provide a broader understanding of the situation.

All KIIs, except for one, were conducted virtually. At the outset, interviewees were briefed about the objective of the exercise and the anticipated use of the collected data. Notes were taken during the interviews and translated following their completion. Given the sensitivity of the information collected, the current context and the associated security and safety risks, collected data were anonymized, and the documented backlash incidents were shared with interviewees for their consent and feedback on how the information was noted and reported. The names of the interviewees and CSOs who partook in this exercise are also not mentioned in this report.

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using NVivo, a computer software program allowing researchers to manage, analyze and visualize qualitative data and documents systematically and individually. Out of the 21 interviews, 20 were included in the analysis as one CSO did not engage in any specific gender-related activities since 2021 and thus did not provide insight related to the purpose of the exercise.

Limitations

This documentation is based on KIIs with a total of 21 CSOs working in Lebanon, which represents a small sample of the CSOs working in the country; thus, the reported backlash incidents are only representative of the interviewed CSOs and do not represent a comprehensive documentation of the backlash that has taken place in Lebanon against all CSOs. Moreover, this documentation exercise is based on qualitative interviews with CSO representative and their accounts of the backlash that their organization has faced; thus, the research cannot be considered statistically representative and only provides an overview of the main resistance and backlash that specific organizations working in gender-related activities in different areas and with different groups faced in an attempt to give a broader understanding of the situation.

Profiles of CSOs

Interviewees were initially requested to provide an overview of their organization and its mandate, as well as their activities, target groups and areas of operation, specifically those that took place from 2022 onwards. Based on the responses, the CSOs included in this exercise work in different regions in the country, with 10 reporting activities in the Beirut and Mount Lebanon area, four in the North and Bekaa, three in the South and two inside Palestinian camps and gatherings. A total of 13 of these CSOs reported working in multiple regions in the country – i.e., at the national level.

Interviewed CSOs work with target groups of different nationalities: 16 reported working with Lebanese nationals; 13 with Syrian refugees; 10 with Palestinian refugees; and eight

with migrant workers. Moreover, all CSOs (20) work mainly with women; six reported working with LGBTQI+ communities and youth; three with children; two with marginalized women (prisoners, ex-prisoners, sex workers and drug users); and one works with persons with disabilities (PwDs).

Figure 1. Geographical scope of activities of CSOs (number of CSOs)

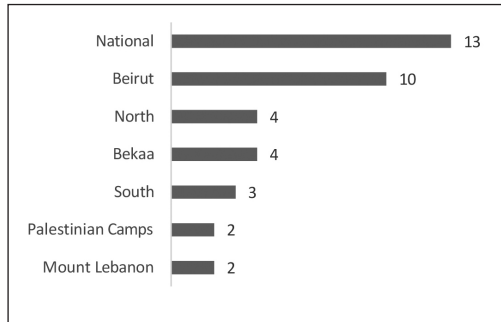
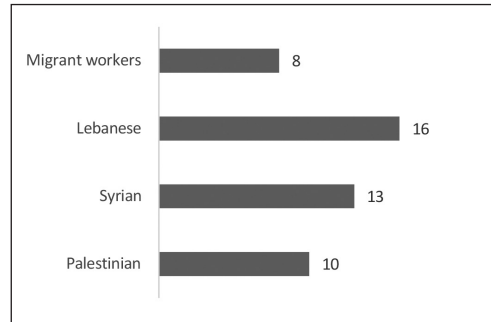


Figure 2. Target groups of CSOs (number of CSOs)



Findings

Contextual Challenges and Types of Resistance

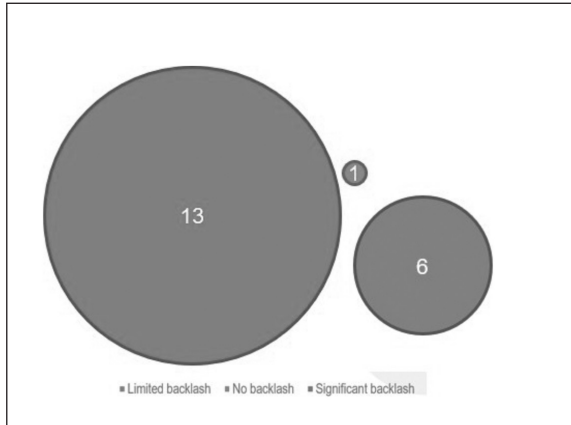
Results from the KIIs reveal that organizations working on women’s rights and LGBTQI+ rights in Lebanon face increasing and pervasive resistance and backlash threatening their ability to conduct activities and work towards achieving their mandates. KIIs reveal that resistance and backlash in Lebanon manifest in different ways and can be triggered by a broad spectrum of factors.

Prevalence of Resistance and Backlash Faced

When asked about the prevalence of resistance and backlash, findings reveal that almost all (19) organizations have faced some backlash or resistance since January 2022, with 13 CSOs experiencing what they described as significant backlash. Significant backlash was correlated with opposition, challenges or adverse reactions significantly impacting their work and initiatives. Six CSOs reported experiencing what they described as a limited backlash, indicating that their encounters with resistance were relatively less intense or impactful. It is important to note that each organization reported multiple events of backlash and resistance during the specified timeframe. On the other hand, only one organization reported not facing any resistance or backlash. The organization reported several incidents that could potentially be categorized by the researchers as resistance; however, these were dismissed by the organization as “contextual challenges” that should not be considered as backlash or resistance.

When asked about trends of resistance and backlash during the period under study compared to previous years, most CSOs (12) indicated that backlash is on the rise. Five CSOs indicated that resistance and backlash to their mandates and activities are still the same but have become more visible since 2022, while three were indecisive. Several interviewees expressed shock resulting from the dramatic setback and resistance they have witnessed in the last year and a half, with many voicing concerns about a “soon-to-explode” situation that would make these organizations the direct targets of violence and extremism.

Figure 3. Prevalence of reported backlash (number of CSOs)

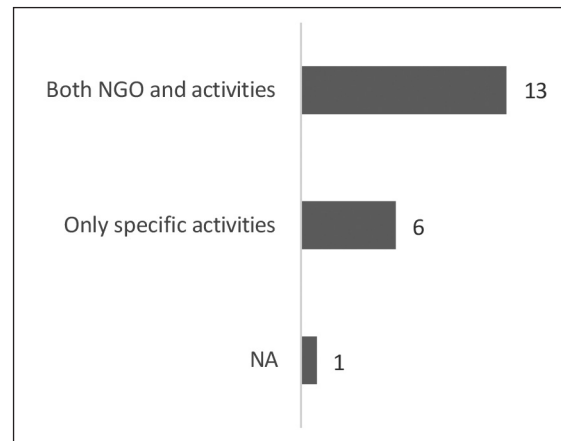


The backlash has increased, mainly because civil society is getting increasingly established and threatening the established authorities, and Islamic groups want to indoctrinate children, boys and girls. – CSO representative

Targets of Backlash

The resistance documented during the interviews varied from resistance to specific project activities to resistance to the larger mandate or mission of the organizations. The majority of CSOs (13) reported experiencing attacks at the level of both their activities and at the level of the organization (its mission and mandate), with six organizations reporting that the backlash was only targeted at specific activities. Trends from the interviews reveal that backlash is often initiated against activities being implemented on the ground and then amplified to oppose the larger mandate and mission of the organization, or vice versa. Such patterns highlight the interconnectedness between the activities carried out by these organizations and the underlying values they seek to promote, leading to a broader scope of backlash against their overall mission.

Figure 4. Targets of backlash (number of CSOs)



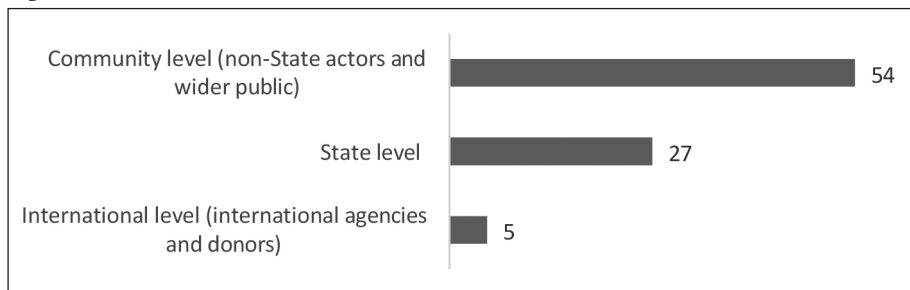
Main Perpetrators of Backlash

The majority of resistance and backlash incidents reported were by communities – including non-State actors and the wider public – (54 actors), followed by State actors (27 actors), and finally by international actors (five actors).

Table 1. Categorization of sources of resistance and backlash⁶

State-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State officials • Security forces • Judges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayors and municipality members • Government employees • Religious State institutions and authorities
Community-level (non-State actors and wider public)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious authorities and figures • Wider public • Local communities • CSOs working with women and service-providers • Political parties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paramilitary groups • Local politically affiliated groups • Landlords and venue managers • Syndicate representatives
International-level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International agencies • Donors • UN agencies 	

Figure 5. Sources of resistance and backlash (number of incidents)



At the level of State actors, the main perpetrators of backlash were reported to include: State officials, such as ministers and parliamentarians (10 incidents), security forces (nine incidents), and State religious institutions (four incidents). Inputs from the interviews indicate that State-perpetrated backlash against gender equality work has increased since the economic and financial collapse. Interviewees mentioned a series of State-level backlash incidents that have trickled down by inciting community-level backlash.

During Pride Month in June 2022, Lebanon’s Minister of Interior directed a letter to the General Directorate of General Security (GS) and the General Directorate of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) urging them to prevent gatherings that “promote homosexuality” (L’Orient Today, 2022). In the letter, the Minister expressed concern about the spread of calls on social media for organizing celebrations that aim to endorse same-sex relationships in Lebanon. He mentioned that religious leaders who oppose this phenomenon had approached the Ministry and emphasized the potential negative impact on individuals and society. Consequently, he requested security forces to take the necessary actions to stop any event, meeting or gathering that intends to promote this phenomenon. The Minister also contended that invoking freedom of expression would not be applicable in this case because it goes against the customs and traditions of Lebanese society and the principles of monotheistic religions. Lebanon’s prominent Sunni religious figure, Mufti Sheikh Abdel Latif Derian, stated that Dar Al-Fatwa (the highest Sunni authority in Lebanon) would not

permit the legalization of homosexuality or civil marriage (L'Orient Today, 2022). Shia and Druz representatives voiced similar condemnations.

The Minister of Interior violated the Constitution and Lebanese laws and disregarded all international declarations and all scientific and public health evidence, such as from the World Health Organization. His decision was based on merely religious grounds and traditions. – CSO representative

To challenge this letter, a lawsuit was filed by The Legal Agenda and Helem before the State Council in August 2022 and eventually, on 1 November, the State Council (Lebanon's high administrative court), suspended the execution of the Minister of Interior's decision (The Legal Agenda and Helem Lebanon, 2022). Nonetheless, even following this decision, the Minister of Interior banned two LGBTQI+ events, bypassing the administrative court's temporary suspension of his June ban (López-Tomás, 2022).

Another example of State-sponsored backlash included a statement by the Minister of Social Affairs during a newspaper interview in March 2023 when he called on the UN to re-evaluate its priorities in Lebanon, suggesting that the work on women's political participation and early marriage are not a priority:

Is the priority in Lebanon, with all due respect, to improve women's participation in political work? Is this how the situation in Lebanon will be solved? Is this their priority today? This is one of the goals, but is this a priority? To stop child marriage and reduce childbirth among minors. Are these priorities to solve the crisis? – Hector Hajjar, Minister of Social Affairs (Hourany, 2023)

In February 2023, the Lebanese Forum to Preserve the Family and Values held a conference that was endorsed by the Minister of Culture and, with representation from all religious authorities in the country, aimed to promote the practice of conversion therapy. In its closing statement, the conference called on the Ministry of Interior to control the work of groups and organizations that are threatening the existence of the Lebanese family and religious values by attempting to introduce unaccepted values and terms, such as “gender”, and requested immediate legislation by the Parliament to protect the Lebanese family (Mohamad, 2023).

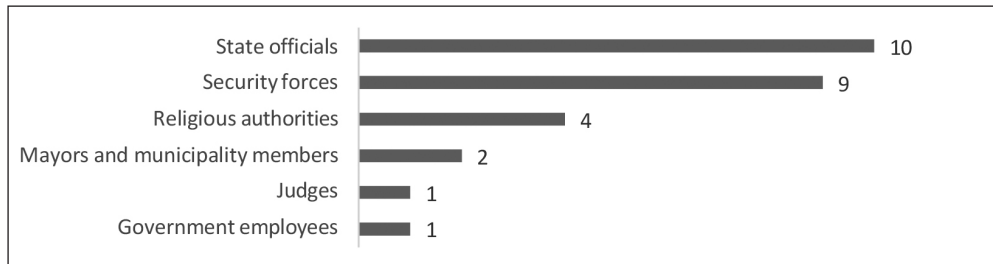
Mayors and members of municipalities were considered perpetrators of backlash (two incidents), specifically when CSO activities revolved around increasing women's political participation and supporting them in upcoming elections. Some mayors refused to hold activities in a number of areas, and the heads of a few municipalities refused to host CSOs in their municipal buildings.

In a similar context, some judges are contributing to the opposition faced by the LGBTQI+ community, mainly by utilizing Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code to criminalize “unnatural sexual intercourse.” One interviewee noted that efforts are being made to address this issue through training and awareness-raising among judges on human rights principles and the use of this article. Also, it is essential to note that in the last few years, there have been a few recorded cases where judges issued rulings to halt the investigation of individuals prosecuted under Article 534, instead insisting on their “interpretive authority” (Karame, 2016).

Finally, in one interview, State employees were reported to be among the perpetrators of backlash through intentional delays in processing essential paperwork required for orga-

nizations to carry out their activities. Specifically, a CSO working with women prisoners reported frequent obstacles in obtaining the necessary paperwork to access prisons and conduct visits.

Figure 6. State-level sources of resistance (number of incidents)

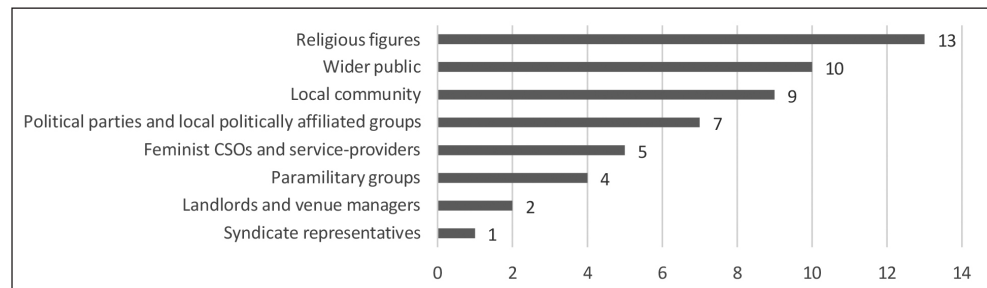


At the community level, the most frequently reported perpetrators of backlash were: religious leaders and groups, including sheikhs, priests, preachers, religious volunteers and service groups (13 incidents); followed by the general wider community, including those on social media and online platforms (10 incidents); the local community (nine incidents); political parties and local politically affiliated groups (seven incidents); feminist CSOs and other service-providers (five incidents); and paramilitary groups (four incidents). Perpetrators of backlash also included, to a lesser extent, landlords and venue managers (two incidents).

Resistance and backlash from religious leaders and groups are often based on accusations that organizations are: (1) promoting homosexuality; (2) encouraging divorce and breaking family ties; and (3) promoting “Western agendas” that are in direct opposition to the principles of Islam and Christianity. Opposition is often seen when organizations implement activities related to gender-based violence, case management and early marriage. Notably, resistance and backlash from religious leaders and groups often mobilize the community and local resistance. Moreover, a considerable amount of resistance and backlash happens online on social media platforms targeting posts from organizations mainly related to sexual and reproductive health issues, access to menstrual hygiene, sex workers’ rights and LGBTQI+ rights.

Radical groups represent a newly emerging source of backlash, posing direct threats to the work of organizations. The group known as Soldiers of God “Jnoud El Rab” in Beirut has taken on the mission to “preserve” Christian values against what it describes as aberrant behaviour, specifically against the LGBTQI+ community, refugees and civil marriage advocates, among other “sins”. The group was filmed destroying a pride flag billboard in their area of presence and later posted a video blatantly threatening the LGBTQI+ community (July 2022) (Sweidan, 2022). It was reported that this group also set informal security checkpoints and harassed the local community.

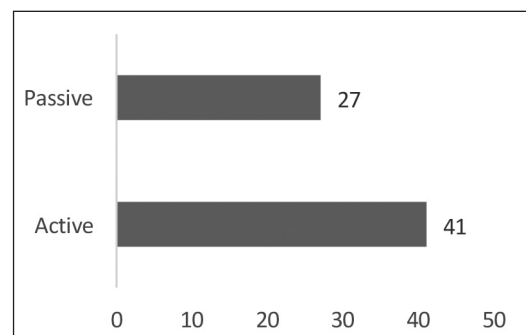
Figure 7. Community-level sources of resistance (number of incidents)



Forms of Backlash

Backlash and resistance incidents described throughout the report can be categorized into two broad categories: passive forms of resistance, including omission, denial, disavowal and inaction and more active forms of resistance, including appeasement, appropriation and co-option, political backlash and backsliding, and repression. The majority of the resistance reported by CSOs was worryingly on the active end of the spectrum (41 incidents), although passive resistance is still highly significant (27 incidents).

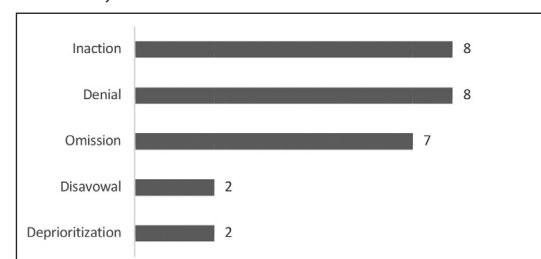
Figure 8. Forms of backlash (number of incidents)



Passive resistance took the form of denial (eight incidents) that there was a problem specifically related to the existence of gender imbalances and inequality and GBV; omission (seven incidents) through refusal to discuss these rights and withdrawal from participation in activities specifically related to early marriage and the LGBTQI+ community; disavowal of responsibility (two incidents); and inaction (eight incidents). This refusal to acknowledge the importance of these issues can be just as damaging as more overt forms of resistance, as it creates an environment of invisibility and marginalization for these communities. An example of this includes government inaction following a break-in of a CSO's offices or a governmental official's statement de-prioritizing women's rights and child marriage. On a more systemic level, some CSOs reported facing resistance in the form of de-prioritization (two incidents), in terms of funding for gender-related work by donors and government officials, which might be unintended considering the need for humanitarian programming and the shifting of funding at a global scale.

The backlash reported by women's and LGBTQI+ organizations in Lebanon is primarily characterized by active resistance, evidenced by a total of 41 reported incidents. This resistance takes various forms, with the most prevalent being aggressive opposition (17 incidents) in the form of violent attacks, verbal threats and personal defamation. This poses a significant threat to both

Figure 9. Passive forms of resistance (number of incidents)



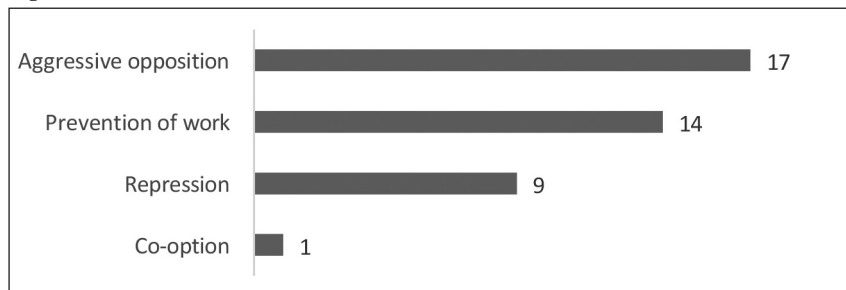
the staff and beneficiaries of these organizations, often forcing them to temporarily curtail or completely halt their operations.

Prevention of work, the second most common form of active resistance (14 incidents), encompasses a wide range of tactics used to inhibit the work of these organizations. This includes bureaucratic hurdles imposed by the State apparatus, such as delays in issuing clearances for activities and actions by other community members and stakeholders that prevent these organizations from carrying out their projects and programs. For instance, refusing to grant event venues or denying access to specific community areas can significantly hamper their efforts.

Repression (nine recorded incidents) represents another critical form of backlash. This includes State-sanctioned discriminatory measures, such as unwarranted involvement of security forces and unjust surveillance. It also involves societal pressures, such as harassment and demonization, which foster a hostile environment for these organizations to operate in.

Lastly, co-option, despite being the least common form of active resistance, with just one recorded incident, represents a subtler but equally detrimental form of backlash. This involves misappropriation or manipulation of the organization’s mandate, efforts or messages to serve contrary agendas, thus undermining the intended impact of their work, as evidenced by religious figures misrepresenting themselves as feminists and attempting to co-opt and derail a feminist protest.

Figure 10. Active forms of backlash (number of incidents)



Finally, internal resistance within the CSO can also pose challenges. Staff disagreements with the CSO’s mandate and tensions within the target community due to lack of funding and resources can all undermine the CSO’s unity and effectiveness.

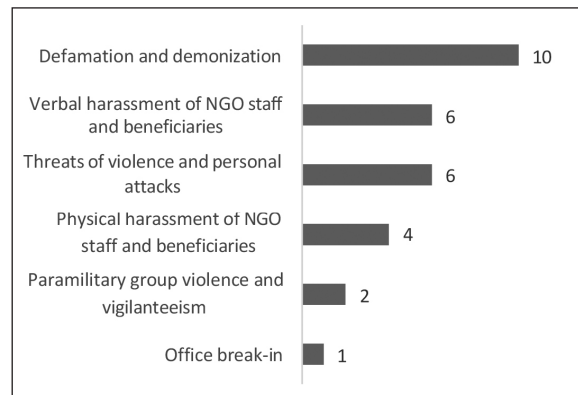
Manifestations of Backlash

The reported manifestations of backlash against women’s and LGBTQI+ rights groups in Lebanon can be seen at community, State and civil society levels.

At the community level, organizations faced significant resistance, with defamation and demonization being the most prevalent types (10 incidents). These tactics aim to tarnish the reputation of the CSO, delegitimize its work, and create an atmosphere of fear and hostility. Organizations’ staff and beneficiaries frequently encountered verbal harassment (six incidents) and threats of violence or personal attacks (six incidents). Physical harassment (four incidents) and radical group violence and vigilantism (two incidents) posed serious concerns, while a single incident of an office break-in was reported. These forms of aggression threaten the safety and well-being of those involved with the CSO and create a climate of fear that can deter potential beneficiaries from seeking the CSO’s services.

State-level resistance represented another significant source of resistance, with State-sanctioned discriminatory measures being the most frequently reported form of backlash (15 incidents). This category includes unwarranted security forces' involvement (nine incidents), stalking and surveillance (five incidents), and requests for IDs by security forces (one incident). De-prioritization of women and LGBTQI+ issues by State officials (four incidents), bureaucratic delays in issuing clearances for activities (one incident), and lack of protection and impunity (one incident) also contributed to systemic resistance. These measures legitimize and institutionalize discrimination against women and LGBTQI+ individuals. Stalking and surveillance, both physical and digital, represent invasive forms of active resistance that infringe on the privacy and security of the CSO and its members.

Figure 11. Community-level manifestations of backlash (number of incidents)



In the civil society sphere, backlash during project activities was most prevalent in the form of attacks and withdrawal from activities (six incidents), followed by the absence of support from relevant stakeholders, such as other CSOs, international NGOs, UN organizations and donors (four incidents). Discrimination from CSOs and service-providers (two

Figure 12. State-level backlash (number of incidents)

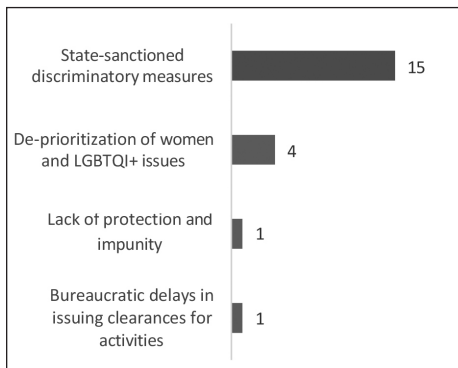
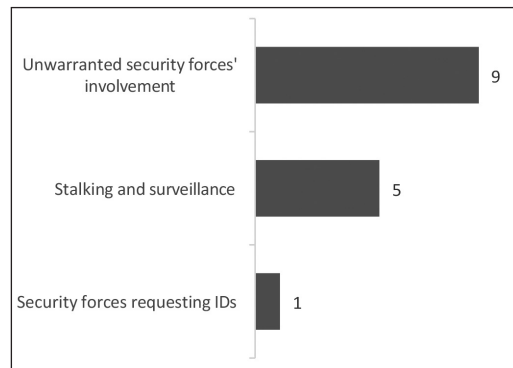


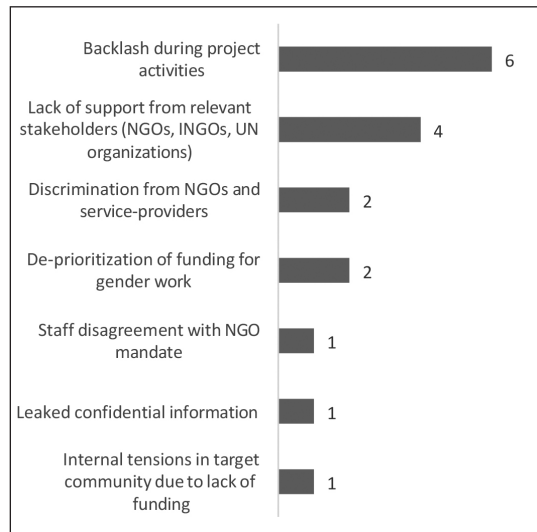
Figure 13. State-sanctioned discriminatory measures (number of incidents)



incidents) and the de-prioritization of funding for gender work (two incidents) further hampered the CSO's work. Internal tensions within the target community due to lack of funding (one incident), staff disagreement with the CSO's mandate (one incident), and leaks of confidential information (one incident) represent additional challenges.

Within the private sector, tensions with landlords and venue-owners (two incidents) and refusal by the private sector to employ CSO's target communities (one incident) constitute forms of resistance.

Figure 14. Civil society-level backlash (number of incidents)



Resistance and Backlash Incidents

The section below summarizes the long list of resistance and backlash incidents reported in the KIIs. Incidents were categorized by region to make detecting trends in the different areas easier.

Backlash in Palestinian Camps

The backlash against CSOs working on gender equality in Lebanon has had a significant and systemic impact, particularly during the 16 Days of Activism campaign (November–December 2022). Organizations implementing activities as part of the campaign were called out by name and attacked. In one camp, the

organizers of an International Women’s Day march faced accusations of supporting Zionist, Western and LGBTQI+ agendas. Religious figures and the local community confronted the march organizers, arguing that there were more pressing national priorities than fighting for gender equality; consequently, the march had to be postponed and ultimately cancelled due to security and safety concerns and a prominent UN agency withdrew from the march. In another camp, a hosting organization received threats over the phone, leading to the closure of one of its centers.

During this period, one CSO representative reported direct harassment and threats of violence and death. Feminist activists in the camps have been derogatorily labelled “CEDAW-iyat,” or those who are advocates of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), with parallel surveillance and backlash against gender training involving the word CEDAW. Religious edicts or fatwas were issued in some mosques against some CSOs by name, instructing people not to allow their children to participate in their activities. Consequently, some parents stopped sending their children, especially girls, to engage in the CSOs’ programs.

Religious figures in the camps accused feminist organizations of encouraging homosexuality and attempting to convert Muslims to Christianity. Finally, there were attempts to impose a code of conduct on CSOs working on gender equality in the camps. This code

stipulated that all activities must be approved by the religious authorities and that activities should not attempt to subvert traditions, cultural and/or religious beliefs. Organizations refused to sign the code of conduct and invited religious leaders to visit their centers and engage in dialogue to discuss their concerns.

You cannot summon us. If you want to talk to us, feel free to come by the centers of the CSOs, and we refuse to sign any code of conduct. – CSO representative

We, the women, are partners in the national struggle. You cannot hide us inside houses; we are partners in change, struggle and decision-making. – CSO representative

A CSO that organizes football and basketball training for girls and boys inside the camp faced backlash from religious figures who opposed girls wearing shorts during sports activities. Religious figures discouraged girls from participating in sports, considering it contrary to religious teachings and an attempt to introduce “Western ideas” into the camps. Opposition expanded to unfounded accusations of promoting homosexuality.

One interviewee reported that a UN agency has ceased all gender equality activities since October 2022. The interviewee further mentioned that some organizations have had to cease activities with the UN agency because they are, as per the interviewee, “not committed to their mandate and are violating human rights principles”.

Finally, it is essential to note that a lot of the backlash initiated from inside camps spread to the outside of the camps, impacting the work of CSOs near the camps and in gatherings. The opposite was also true, as religious figures outside the camps influenced the backlash in the camps.

Backlash in the Bekaa

Reported resistance in the Bekaa targeted some organizations conducting activities related to women’s political participation. Several mayors and municipalities declined to permit a CSO to carry out their project activities to enhance women’s political participation and nominations in municipal elections. Despite this, in one village, the organization discreetly invited local interested women to participate in a neighboring village and proceeded with their activities, while in another village, they were able to hold their activities in a private venue.

Rumors and defamation have also been major challenges. Religious figures spread rumors in a village and local community that an organization was mandating its employees to remove the hijab, but the organization did not respond to these rumors. Additionally, a CSO faced accusations of teaching girls to dance, which was deemed to be against religious teachings. The community and a Sheikh called for an investigation into the CSO’s activities based on these allegations.

Finally, an organization working with Syrian refugee women reported frequent unwarranted visits by security forces requesting identification cards and legal residency permits for staff members and visitors, causing fear and discomfort. These interventions were reported to be common among organizations working with and employing Syrian refugees and not implicit to organizations working with women. However, it is essential to note, as intersectional factors are fundamental when reflecting on the intensity of the backlash.

Backlash in the North

GBV case management centers and safe shelters have been targeted and defamed, leading to significant challenges for CSOs operating in this field. The prioritization of women and children's protection by a CSO in its life-saving services sparked backlash. Perpetrators, often husbands or fathers, accused these organizations of kidnapping their wives and children and attempting to convert them to Christianity. The CSO also reported being accused of promoting homosexuality within their communities. These allegations have been amplified by religious figures, further exacerbating the situation. Moreover, public comments by the local community claim that because of the work of these organizations, women "no longer need protection while men now need more help".

Sheikhs and faith-based women's committees have circulated voice messages on WhatsApp groups, cautioning others about CSOs and their alleged efforts to break up families and promote conversion to Christianity, particularly in the North. Consequently, participants and individuals seeking help have become reluctant to attend activities at the CSOs' centers and/or use their case-management services.

A CSO conducting awareness-raising sessions on early marriage faced backlash from religious figures and the local community, which accused them of going against religious beliefs. The CSO reported participants withdrawing from their activities as a result. A group of conservative religious figures issued a blocklist containing the names of CSOs accused of going against the principles of Islam, destroying families and promoting homosexuality. This list has been widely circulated in the North through WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages. Religious authorities have also organized several conferences attacking these organizations and recorded and disseminated videos in which they preach against CSOs and their "harmful" effects on the community.

Backlash in Rural Mount Lebanon

The backlash CSOs face has been marked by vicious defamation and personal attacks. For instance, a CSO and its director reported experiencing significant backlash after publishing a post about women's access to menstrual hygiene products. They were subjected to derogatory labelling online and by the local community, such as "the menstrual pads CSO", and false accusations emerged that the female volunteers dressed indecently in public. The director was specifically targeted, with her images edited alongside pictures of pads and shared online. Screenshots from her personal Facebook profile were also made public. Demands were made to remove all related posts from their social media platforms and cease activities on the topic. The attacks predominantly originated from the local community and included prominent religious figures.

Similarly, when a CSO announced it was launching a hotline for victims of gender-based violence, it faced an onslaught of backlash from the local community. The community argued that the CSO was establishing a GBV call center in an area where such services were not needed, insisting that they would not receive any calls. The organization received an avalanche of threats and backlash from the local community and religious figures in the area. They were accused of threatening the area's security, breaking traditions and cultural beliefs, and inciting women to divorce their husbands. These accusations were mainly in response to awareness campaigns that specifically addressed marital rape. The CSO also reported receiving a call from a leading religious figure accusing them of "exaggerating" by inciting women to rebel against their husbands, threatening the security of women, the family unit and the area more broadly. Members of the local community started referring to the hotline as "the household destruction hotline", "the divorce hotline", and the "excessive freedoms hotline".

In another distressing incident, the director of a CSO added a frame supporting the LGBTQI+ community to her Facebook profile picture, which led to aggressive attacks – both online and offline. She received calls demanding the removal of the frame, and a high-ranking religious leader reached out to someone else to express their disapproval, accusing her of promoting “aberrant beliefs” from the West and tarnishing the reputation of the long-standing CSO she worked for. Furthermore, during an event at a community center, the same director was verbally attacked by a religious figure giving a speech. The religious figure disparaged her, stating that they were gathered for charitable purposes, unlike those who feigned culture while promoting “aberrant behavior and mental illnesses”. This was an apparent attempt to intimidate and embarrass her in front of the attendees.

These incidents demonstrate the severity of the attacks that many CSOs, their staff and their beneficiaries have faced. The defamation and personal attacks have not only targeted individuals but also impacted the reputations and work of the organizations themselves.

Backlash in Beirut and Mount Lebanon

The aggressive opposition and militarism directed towards CSOs have created significant challenges in their operations. One interviewee reported increased backlash during awareness activities conducted by a CSO focused on shifting mindsets on LGBTQI+ issues. With vigilantism and the misuse of the Ministry of Interior decree as justification, trainers and participants were verbally harassed on site. As mentioned above, a radical group called Soldiers of God vandalized an LGBTQI+-related billboard and targeted artwork of women’s bodies during breast cancer awareness month. Individuals associated with CSOs have faced threats and violence, such as a trans woman who could not attend an event due to a gun threat.

Moreover, several CSOs reported unwarranted raids on their centers, leading to temporary closures, while tensions with the private sector have risen as landlords and venue-owners refused to rent their spaces or threatened to evict CSOs serving marginalized communities. A CSO reported that security forces instructed a hotel manager to cancel a workshop for medical professionals. The workshop proceeded without interference after obtaining an endorsement letter from the Lebanese AIDS Network Association (LANA), which falls under the Ministry of Public Health. CSOs said they also face restrictions, surveillance and interference by security forces, monitoring hotels hosting workshops and scrutinizing social media content.

We document how many times the security apparatuses visit us. We welcome them with baklawa. They say, “You here are the gays?” “No, we are a center open to everyone.” – CSO representative

Despite the suspension of the Minister of Interior’s decision banning any meetings or gatherings that promotes what he called “the phenomenon of sexual deviance” by the State Council, Lebanon’s high administrative court and security forces have intensified the backlash.

Several interviewees reported different resistance levels and backlash from some UN agencies and donors. In 2022, following a leak containing information on activities and events held by different organizations during Pride Month, interviewees mentioned that the leak was neither investigated nor was any person/group held responsible for this incident that resulted in a massive and unforeseen backlash against organizations working with LGBTQI+ communities as well as organizations working with women. Several interviewees blamed UN agencies and donors for their inaction and lack of support during these events.

In addition, several organizations mentioned that the overall decrease in funding in Lebanon is disproportionately affecting gender-related programs. Also, donors are not doing enough to ensure that inclusive organizations deliver their programs or to hold non-inclusive organizations accountable.

Backlash in the South

Resistance in the form of vicious defamation was reported in the South. An organization said that a social media post attacked an activity to combat gender-based discrimination and stereotypes. The workshop activity involved participants wearing labels with various words highlighting how harmful labelling and judging others can be. One of the labels used the word “homosexual”. Someone on social media misused a picture from the workshop, combined it with an unrelated explicit image, and falsely claimed that the CSO was promoting homosexuality. This misleading post was shared in a WhatsApp group with religious authorities in the South. As a result, some parents stopped sending their children to join the activities. In another incident, during a sexual and reproductive health awareness campaign, a CSO’s post relating to the fact that condoms must be single-use to be safe sparked an avalanche of backlash. Detractors accused the organizations of distributing free condoms in the South and promoting premarital sex. This criticism came primarily from the general public and received significant attention, with thousands of views and hundreds of comments. The organization had to delete the post from social media to lessen the backlash.

Questioning and break-ins were also reported. A CSO reported their staff being questioned by local political authorities following travel to attend a workshop. Another CSO reported that several people coming to their center were stopped by politically affiliated individuals/groups and lectured about the dangers of feminist CSOs. A CSO reported an office break-in seemingly aiming at surveillance as the only stolen documents from the office were the lists with beneficiary names, leading to concerns for beneficiary safety due to leaked attendance lists. Despite filed complaints, the organization reported a lack of action against perpetrators, which it attributed to their affiliation with local political authorities.

Impact of Backlash

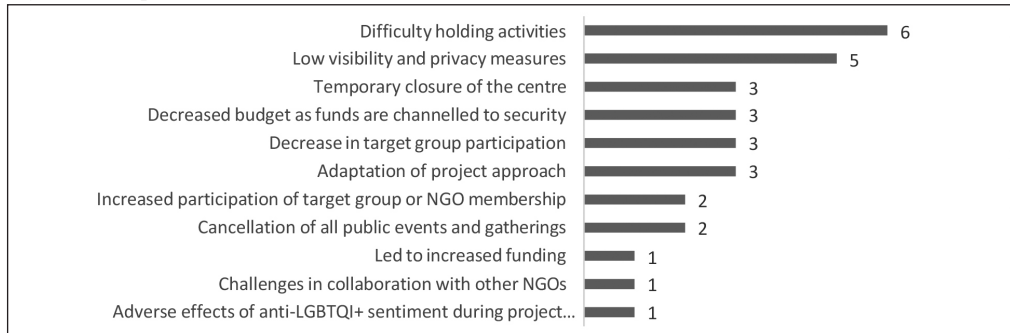
Impact on Activities

KIIs revealed a range of impacts on activities resulting from the backlash. The most frequently reported consequence was difficulty holding activities (reported six times). This hindered organizations’ ability to carry out their projects effectively and serve their intended beneficiaries. Another significant impact was the reduced visibility and increased privacy measures (five times), which compromised their outreach efforts and the safety of their members. Many organizations could not organize any public events and resorted to closed events with limited outreach. Additionally, organizations reported adapting their project approaches due to the backlash, such as changing workshops’ titles to be less specific, using terminology like “human rights” instead of “gender equality” (three times).

Furthermore, some CSOs highlighted a decrease in the participation of their target groups, most likely resulting from the hostile environment created by the backlash (three times); one example includes mental health support sessions in which participation decreased following police visits to the CSO centers. Financial strain was also evident, with some organizations experiencing a decrease in their budgets as funds were redirected towards increased security measures to protect themselves and their beneficiaries (three times). In some cases, the backlash led to temporary closures of centers and the cancellation of public events and gatherings. However, the KIIs also uncovered a few positive outcomes, such as incidents when the participation of target groups or CSO membership increased follow-

ing the backlash (reported twice), increased funding as funders acknowledged the necessity of additional funding for security measures and alternative programming (reported once), as well as strengthened collaborations (reported once).

Figure 15. Impact of backlash on activities (number of incidents)

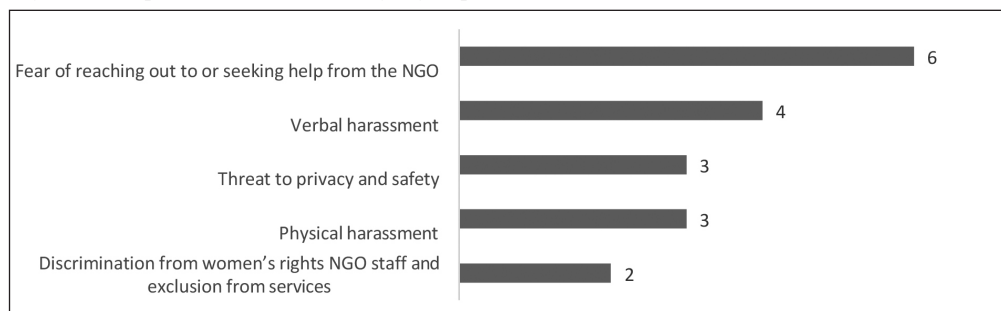


Impact on Target Groups

The impacts of the resistance and backlash were notable on target groups. Fear of participation in activities or heading to the centers of organizations was the most frequently reported effect of the backlash (six times). This fear is most likely attributed to the pervasive backlash and societal pressures surrounding women and LGBTQI+ rights in Lebanon and the systemic defamation and demonization of those CSOs. Verbal harassment of beneficiaries was also reported (four times), further underscoring the hostility and discrimination faced by beneficiaries wanting to participate in CSO activities. The interviews also uncovered instances (three times) of threats to privacy and safety.

Additionally, physical harassment was reported (three times), demonstrating a hostile environment surrounding CSO centers or implementation sites. Finally, KIIs revealed instances of discrimination within women’s rights CSO staff themselves and their exclusion of certain groups of beneficiaries (such as the LGBTQI+ community, from receiving their services (two incidents), highlighting the discrimination that marginalized communities face from local and international CSOs and service-providers. These findings emphasize the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address and mitigate the backlash faced by organizations working on women and LGBTQI+ rights in Lebanon to safeguard the well-being and rights of the marginalized communities they serve.

Figure 16. Impact of backlash on target groups (number of incidents)



Mitigation Strategies

This exercise explored organizations' different pathways and strategies to mitigate or manage the resistance and backlash they faced. To this end, several mitigation measures were common among CSOs.

Among the most-reported strategies adopted were: (1) increasing security measures, and (2) minimizing external visibility (eight CSOs), which was explicitly relevant to organizations working with LGBTQI+ communities and Syrian refugees. CSOs noted that following and during the backlash, more attention and resources were spent when renting venues for their activities, in addition to developing resilience plans such as having set security plans for their staff to follow. Moreover, CSOs reported making their work "less visible" by decreasing social media posts related to programs, activities or public events and visibility during the implementation of activities on the ground so that their work goes under the radar to avoid backlash. The above measures were relevant in cases of active resistance.

Surprisingly, a considerable number of CSOs (eight) reported avoiding confrontation and refusing to engage or respond to resistance as their primary mitigation strategy. This was particularly relevant for "older" and more established organizations that have been operating in the Lebanese context for many years. Many interviewees mentioned that their programs and operations continue to function as planned as long as no direct threats are posed to them or their beneficiaries. Some interviewees even said they got used to verbal and physical threats and were unaffected by them.

Engaging in increased dialogue and communication with religious leaders and influential figures was a prevalent strategy to address resistance related to sensitive issues, including early marriage and GBV. The main driver behind this strategy is to create spaces for dialogue, connectivity and relatedness with religious values to decrease resistance and mobilize these figures in the struggle. Organizations work to develop strategies that effectively frame their narratives in a way that resonates with various stakeholders, making them contextually relevant and persuasive. These organizations recognize, however, that shifting ideologies within communities requires time. It is important to note that other organizations dismiss this strategy and refuse to engage with religious figures and authorities.

Other CSOs mentioned switching to alternative intervention methods and socially acceptable terminologies to lessen the backlash within conservative communities. An organization noted that using interactive theatre instead of training sessions on GBV and gender equality allowed them to deliver their messages more smoothly and gain support with lesser resistance from participants. Some organizations adopted a strategy of using more general and inclusive workshop titles, such as "health care during crises," rather than explicitly stating LGBTQI+-specific health-care topics, while ensuring that the content of the workshops remains the same. This approach allows organizations to address the needs and concerns of diverse communities without singling out specific groups while creating an inclusive environment that does not provoke a backlash.

Moreover, community-level engagement and support-building were reported as successful strategies, such as advocating publicly to secure the support of the public in advancing specific approaches and advocating for their agendas. Community-level support has been crucial in the face of the backlash and has allowed organizations to face local backlash due to the awareness and engagement they have built with the surrounding community. However, a few organizations resorted to shutting down their centers and cancelling or archiving activities to respond to the active backlash they faced.

Support Required from Different Stakeholders

I don't care about protests and statements – I want a space that says this is a space for trans women that no hostile individual can touch. – CSO representative

We need networking, solidarity and cooperation to create a new discourse that can reach the masses. Sometimes people don't relate to the 'heavy' language used in human rights; we need a narrative that can reach women and that the masses can relate to, and empathize with and talk about. This would create engagement and increase solidarity; there needs to be an alternative to the discourse they hear every day. – CSO representative

I don't waste my resources debating religious courts and religious authorities. Our interests directly oppose their interests, and our presence is an anthesis to their presence. I aim to remove their power and abolish the religious courts and they fight us for this. We have broken the sanctity of religious courts. – CSO representative

The KIIs revealed valuable insights into the support needed by CSOs to address the ongoing and increasing waves of backlash:

- Increased support from donors and UN organizations was identified as a critical priority by most CSOs (14). Requested support from donors is multi-faceted; increased funding is required for the most marginalized groups, as organizations have witnessed a de-prioritization in their funding in recent years and a shrinking in their scope of activities and programs. Adopting flexible funding modalities and flexible implementation so that organizations can direct funds where they are needed most and so that organizations are better able to cope with and respond to evolving circumstances. Funding should also be directed towards inclusive programs that cater to different groups' needs. Aside from funding needs, CSOs asserted the need for more solidarity and advocacy from donor and UN agencies in the face of the backlash they face, as well as more robust support and pressure from donors for the State to respect human rights principles (three CSOs). CSOs working with LGBTQI+ communities (four CSOs) mentioned the need for secure spaces and venues provided and protected by UN agencies and accessible for different organizations to implement their activities. They also noted that several programs managed and funded by UN agencies and international CSOs do not consider the community's needs. One such example is the provision of food aid through faith-based organizations that actively discriminate against the community. The provision of legal support for vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQI+ individuals and Syrian refugees (five CSOs), was also requested. One organization stressed the importance of halting funding to security apparatuses that initiate backlash and act as State tools to perpetuate the backlash.
- The need for increased collaboration, solidarity and partnership-building between local CSOs was stressed by many of the interviewed CSOs (10). First, creating spaces for dialogue between CSOs to share and build awareness would unite different organizations in their struggle to reach the common goal of gender equality. Moreover, increased solidarity allows for coordinated and more powerful responses against resistance and backlash and would make it more challenging to scapegoat a single community, organization or cause. This entails expanding partnership-building by adopting inclusive and intersectional strategies and programs and decreasing the duplication in services and activities.
- Ensuring low-key visibility and safety emerged as a significant concern, with seven CSOs emphasizing the need for such measures. Organizations asserted the need for low external visibility and increased safety measures, including budgetary allocations for increased security measures and mitigation strategies in case of resistance and back-

lash. Moreover, during similar times when active resistance is on the rise, organizations call for reduced visibility and communication surrounding their events to stay under the radar. Additionally, it was mentioned that donors ought to waver their visibility requirements and allow organizations the flexibility of deciding on their visibility strategy based on the context.

- In addition to the previously mentioned support measures, several other measures were identified, albeit with less frequency. Capacity-building for CSO staff focused on service-provision for vulnerable populations was highlighted as a crucial support area. Increased community-level work to change perceptions and foster support, including increased field-level outreach, was also mentioned. One organization cited engaging men and boys in efforts for women and LGBTQI+ rights as an essential measure.

Overall, the findings emphasize the diverse challenges organizations face when working on women and LGBTQI+ rights in Lebanon and underscore the importance of comprehensive support systems to help them navigate and overcome the backlash effectively.

Discussion

With patriarchal backlash escalating globally (Delany, 2022), this documentation exercise reveals that backlash in Lebanon is no different from what is happening in the global arena. This qualitative exercise shows that resistance and backlash against gender equality in Lebanon are rising compared to previous years. Results reveal that although CSOs face diverse and distinct forms and manifestations of backlash, the anti-gender narrative governing the backlash is essentially the same (i.e., CSOs are confronted with the same recurrent accusations). CSOs were mainly accused of:

1. Promoting Western beliefs and agendas and opposing cultural and religious values, as their activities are alleged to subvert traditions, cultural and religious beliefs, including the promotion of religious conversion from Islam to Christianity and encouraging premarital sex.
2. Promoting homosexuality, a sweeping charge often levelled against CSOs with the intent to tarnish their reputation and undermine their standing, even in cases where their activities are not directly related to or centered around LGBTQI+ rights.
3. Destroying the family through encouraging divorces and break-ups, including accusations of kidnapping wives and children in the context of safe shelters.
4. Neglecting national priorities and focusing on “non-urgent” issues like gender equality and gender-based violence.

Perpetrators deploy a range of tactics to attack CSOs and achieve the intended damage, namely through:

- De-prioritization of women and gender equality issues: While the country grapples with political and economic instability, women’s rights and gender equality issues tend to become easily overshadowed and framed as “secondary issues” by community and State actors.
- Establishment of false dichotomies: Causes are pitted against each other mainly by setting women’s rights in opposition to LGBTQI+ rights or national struggles. Promoting homosexuality has become a blind and heavy accusation against all CSOs, irrespective of their mandates or target groups, leading several women CSOs to call for a need to segregate causes and championing only the rights of the groups they represent. This classic ‘divide and conquer’ strategy insinuates that prioritizing one cause comes at the expense of another, thus devaluing both.
- Rampant spread of misinformation and fake news: This includes allegations that CSOs are kidnapping women or promoting premarital sex. This is complemented by fear-mongering, where alarmist narratives are propagated, suggesting that women’s rights

initiatives dissolve traditional family structures, stoking fear and resistance among their communities.

- The tactic of scapegoating stands out prominently, where specific individuals or groups, such as the LGBTQI+ community or refugees, are unjustly blamed for broader societal issues. This deflection from the actual issues redirects public anger towards them. CSOs, in their attempt to shield these marginalized communities, often bear the brunt of this blame.
- This scapegoating often overlaps with the strategy of creating a common enemy. Opposition groups ingeniously intertwine women's rights with contentious topics like religious conversion and misinformation about LGBTQI+ rights, melding these distinct issues into a singular, palpable enemy. This conflation ensures widespread societal push-back against CSOs, further impeding their efforts.
- Beyond these tactics, economic and legal pressures and interference also play a role. Political and State actors have imposed legal restrictions, often unconstitutional, that hamper CSO operations and target vulnerable groups. Surveillance, unwarranted raids, and direct threats from security apparatuses and community-based groups further act to intimidate CSOs.

Results reveal that backlash and resistance against gender equality in Lebanon is a complex and diverse phenomenon that requires careful dissection to uncover and address its dynamics. The section below attempts to dissect and reflect on key findings from this documentation exercise.

Intensifying backlash: The interview results clearly show a distinction in backlash patterns in previous years compared to the period under study (January 2022–April 2023). While reported backlash in the past was prevalent but more subtle at the passive end of the spectrum, interviewed CSOs report more active forms of backlash, including appeasement, appropriation and co-option, political backlash and backsliding, as well as repression. Active forms of backlash are mainly evident among CSOs working with/championing the most vulnerable groups, namely LGBTQI+ communities, refugee women and GBV victims. Such an escalation suggests that threats to the gender equality discourse in Lebanon and the perpetrators of this backlash are becoming more vocal, aggressive and organized. Further studies are needed to investigate the perpetrators of backlash, the underlying root causes of backlash, how this potentially links to the global rollback on rights, and the trigger factors. Thus far, especially among CSOs that faced active and violent forms of backlash, results from the interviews do not signify a reverse in the feminist and gender equality discourse, but it indeed reveals a shrinking of civic space in Lebanon and increased restrictions on the work of some organizations. If this remains unhinged, it could lead to a snowball effect, potentially jeopardizing hard-fought gains towards gender-equal societies. Among some CSOs that reported facing passive forms of backlash, the current resistance and backlash were regarded as an indication of progress for feminist and gender equality agendas in Lebanon.

The impact of concurrent crises: Among interviewees, there was consensus on the inter-linkage between the economic downfall and the increased backlash that CSOs face. The simultaneous crises in the country and the inability of the Lebanese State to address them have been associated with the increase in backlash. The existing patriarchal structure, coupled with the absence of legislative reform, poverty, corruption and political deadlock, gives way to dangerous forms of discrimination, violence and inequality, particularly towards women and persons of diverse gender and sexual identities. The declining role of the State has been associated with societal and cultural breakdown and a rise in conservative and religious groups (including conservative paramilitary groups) that are finding a nurturing

environment as a result of the diminishing role and presence of the State. As some CSOs indicated, there are evident efforts from State and State-affiliated actors to divert attention in the country away from the failure of the State to respond to these crises and redirect the discourse and public attention (especially among conservative and religious groups) to other issues such as “destroying the family, breaking cultural and social beliefs, distortion of religion, etc.” by scapegoating the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as refugees and those belonging to the LGBTQI+ community.

The intersectional nature of the backlash on gender equality and rights: Results show that backlash in the context of Lebanon has a clear intersectional face. The analysis shows that interlocking factors – including sex, gender identity, nationality and disability – are differentiating factors that impact the intensity and impact of backlash. As reported, backlash in the period under consideration has been rampant against CSOs supporting the LGBTQI+ community, and accusations of “promoting homosexuality” have been repeatedly used, even to attack CSOs that do not specifically target these communities. In the same context, the backlash against CSOs working with Syrian refugee women has taken active forms, including harassment by security forces and attempts to limit their ability to work, including by requesting legal documentation of CSOs’ staff. Currently, the backlash against gender equality is being fueled by attacks on refugees and persons of diverse gender and sexual identities.

Fragmentation of the fight for gender equality and rights: The interviews revealed the presence of internal resistance between CSOs themselves. Specifically, KIIs revealed instances of discrimination from women’s rights CSOs and excluded LGBTQI+ communities from services, highlighting the discrimination that marginalized communities face from local and international CSOs and service-providers. Additionally, during one KII, a representative of a women’s rights CSO called for the need to separate causes and struggles, pointing out that the struggles to achieve women’s rights should be separated from the struggles to achieve the rights of persons of diverse gender and sexual identities, emphasizing that the Lebanese population is still not ready for the latter fight. Such a discourse requires further scrutiny. There is also a need for counter-discourse to focus on inclusivity and the creation of common ground among CSOs. This should seek to foster a shared understanding of gender equality, the nature of the struggle, and the importance of unity among CSOs. The intensifying backlash directed towards specific groups is being used to fragment previously joint policy and service-based efforts.

De-prioritization and limited support: KIIs revealed consensus that the available support from international organizations and donors in response to the backlash in the period under study was below par, at different levels. Results indicate increasing separation between international agencies, donors and CSOs working on gender equality. CSO representatives complained about the absence of active support, solidarity and advocacy in the face of the backlash, which intensified in June 2022 during Pride Month and peaked again during the 16 Days of Activism against GBV in November and December. The de-prioritization of funding for gender work by donors and international organizations – which might be unintended, considering the need for humanitarian programming and shifting of funding at a global scale – was also regarded as a type of passive backlash that has had significant implications on sustainability. Non-inclusive funding and stringent funding requirements are further restraining the ability of CSOs to function and reach communities in need. Results reveal a lack of understanding from donors and international agencies of the needs of some CSOs, the needs of the communities they serve, the backlash these CSOs face, and the level of support needed. All this suggests the need for committed donors to increase outreach and communication with CSOs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings detailed above, the Feminist Platform recommends the below actions to address the rising backlash against women's rights and LGBTQI+ organizations in Lebanon:

For Donors and International Organizations:

- Increase communication with local CSOs working with different groups and in different areas to reflect on resistance and backlash, emerging trends and shifts in power dynamics. Build direct contact and communication between donors and NGOs so that donors and international organizations can better understand the context and backlash while CSOs can benefit from donors' lessons learned in the global context.
- Increase communication with CSOs on potential visibility risks before setting communication and visibility strategies, to abide by a "do no harm" approach.
- Increase solidarity and advocacy through more robust support and pressure against State actors perpetrating backlash and reconsider funding for State bodies that initiate or perpetrate backlash.
- Provide safe spaces and venues that are accessible and affordable for different organizations to implement their activities without fear for their staff and/or beneficiaries' safety.
- Increase funding to organizations working with women and other marginalized groups and avoid the de-prioritization of any group.
- Adopt flexible funding modalities and implementation approaches so that organizations can direct funds where they are needed most and better cope with and respond to evolving circumstances (similar to the flexibility provided during the COVID-19 pandemic).
- Fund inclusive programming that caters to different groups' needs. In the case of humanitarian and needs-based programming, ensure that no groups are being discriminated against and/or unjustly denied services.
- Fund and commission research to document and report on resistance and backlash, including collecting data, analyzing it, and monitoring changes and shifts in power dynamics.

For the Feminist Platform:

- Develop a clear strategy to counter backlash and build a common counter-narrative that addresses the above tactics used by perpetrators.
- Strengthen and expand the Feminist Platform to assume a more prominent role in facilitating coordination and collaboration among CSOs. This includes building partnerships to complement work, avoid duplication and act in solidarity in response to the backlash.
- Increase spaces for dialogue between CSOs to create awareness of the needs of different groups and to find common ground. This could be done by ensuring that national and subnational working groups (such as the GWG, Protection Working Group, GBV Working Group, LGBTQI+ Task Force, etc.) are actively involved in fostering this space for increasing dialogue between NGOs on resistance and backlash. This will allow different organizations to implement inclusive programs that reach all demographics.
- Provide legal support for small CSOs and CSOs working with vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQI+ individuals and Syrian refugee women that they could seek out when faced by backlash.
- Facilitate access to dedicated activists and journalists that would act as a resource that CSOs affected by backlash could reach out to, if they so choose, to share their stories and experiences.
- Regularly assess and reflect on resistance and backlash to identify appropriate mitigation and response mechanisms. Also, it is vital to differentiate backlash and resistance from contextual challenges. This could be done through regularly documenting resistance and backlash and bringing it to the forefront of discussions on the gender equality agenda.

For CSOs:

- Adopt a proactive stance in countering backlash, including actively shaping and promoting alternative discourse and engaging in strategic communication, awareness campaigns and targeted messaging.
- Boost community-level work to increase local solidarity and foster support, including increased field-level outreach, to mobilize local communities.
- Whenever possible, adopt inclusive programming that does not leave any group behind.
- Increase safety and security considerations during project implementation to protect implementers and target groups. This entails budgeting for increased security measures and risk- mitigation strategies for resistance.
- In times of increased resistance and backlash, discuss options to reduce the external visibility of programs, public events and activities.
- Train CSO staff on gender equality to avoid internal resistance and backlash.
- Train CSO staff and project implementers on appropriate strategies to respond to, and mitigate, backlash.

Annex

Table A2. KII questions

1. During the last year, did your organization face contextual challenges, resistance or backlash during your work or the activities you were implementing?
2. If yes, please explain the type of resistance your organization/ activities faced. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Was the resistance against specific project activities, or was it to the organization itself (against the mission or mandate)? b. What are the main sources of resistance? Who are the perpetrators? (Community level: religious figures, community leaders, municipal police, etc. State level: political groups, politicians, security forces, etc.) c. How do you describe the resistance (Passive: Omission, denial, disavowal, inaction, etc. or Active: appeasement, appropriation, co-option, repression, backlash, aggressive opposition, prevention of work, etc.)?
3. Did the backlash directly affect implementers or target groups (Verbal or physical harassment, threats, abuse, etc.)? Please explain.
4. How were the organization or activities affected due to the backlash (In the short and long run)?
5. What actions did you take to mitigate, respond to or manage resistance? And what mitigation measures do you think worked best? Please explain.
6. In the face of the backlash and resistance, what kind of action/ support is needed from each of the following: The Feminist Platform, Government, UN agencies, or the international community?
7. Compared to previous years, do you think that gender resistance and backlash are on the rise? Please explain.

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ENDNOTES

1. Lebanon's Feminist Civil Society Platform is comprised of feminist civil society actors and activists convened by UN Women in the aftermath of the 4 August 2020 blast. They issued a unified Charter of Demands urging authorities to put women's issues at the centre of the disaster response plan. Since then, the Feminist Platform has conducted various advocacy initiatives, including contribution to the development of the Lebanon Reform, Recovery & Reconstruction Framework (3RF) sector plans, as well as meetings with representatives of the donor community in Lebanon and with the leadership of the United Nations, European Union, and the World Bank to share their gendered priorities and demands.
2. Throughout the document, resistance is used to indicate negative resistance – a form of pushback against organizations working for gender equality, not to refer to more positive forms of feminist resistance that are associated with progressive social movements.
3. The GWG in Lebanon, chaired by UN Women, is a strategic forum and advocacy platform to promote gender equality and the integration of gender considerations in the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) actions of the United Nations and its partners in Lebanon. The GWG regularly convenes both international and national actors from across sectors to facilitate action on gender equality and women's rights. The GWG is made up of 96 members (21 UN agencies, 26 international NGOs, 31 NGOs, 3 Government representatives and 15 donor Member States) collaborate with the group in an observatory status capacity.
4. The LGBTQI+ Task Force was established in Lebanon in 2021, bringing together several Member States, UN agencies, and national and international organizations for united action for the rights of LGBTQI+ communities (15 UN agencies, 12 international NGOs, 11 NGOs and 16 donors).
5. To make it possible for additional CSOs to be part of the KIIs, an email was circulated to a list of organizations informing them of the exercise and the possibility of being included in this documentation exercise.
6. The categorization of State and non-State actors was based on the following resource: Wijninga, P., Oosterveld, W. T., Galdiga, J. H., & Marten, P. (2014). State and non-state actors: Beyond the dichotomy. In *Strategic Monitor 2014: Four strategic challenges* (pp. 139–162). Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12608.8>

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